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## Becoming Mapuche: Person and Ritual in Indigenous Chile

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**Becoming Mapuche: Person and Ritual in Indigenous Chile.** *Magnus Course.* Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2011. 224 pages.

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This is an unexpected ethnography of personhood because the Mapuche garner so much attention for their political struggles. Magnus Course's focus on what Mapuche men of one region consider the defining characteristics of the "true person," or *che*, thus offers a unique, systemic analysis of the principles that structure interpersonal relations. Course provides a productive twist, however, from traditional approaches to social structure in indigenous societies, in that he emphasizes how individuals with their competing and overlapping interests form tenuous alliances via reciprocal relations, which in turn validate them as "true persons" (or not, as the case may be), rather than assuming that preformed groups construct the person.

In the first 40 pages or so, Course's take-nothing-for-granted, rather mundane approach to the principles of Mapuche relationships may test some readers' patience. He explains that kinship and reciprocity, or "the sociality of exchange," are the primary means by which true people form and strengthen relationships; exchanging gifts, particularly wine among Mapuche men, creates and reinforces relationships; friends and potential affines are of a different order of exchange than patrilineal kin; "true persons" exchange greetings every morning and evening, and, time permitting, visitors inquire about each other and their families; it is offensive to eat in front of someone without offering food; and people's traits are explained by descent, environment, and chance. Such etiquette is little different from that of the Ch'orti' Maya or even

Kansans, among whom I spend most of my time. As the book progresses, though, the distinctiveness of Mapuche life comes into clearer focus as does the rationale for Course's approach because the Mapuche—like Ch'orti's and Kansans—are seen as forming a type of society where individuals have relatively more liberty to build their own one-on-one affiliations, rather than having them imposed by corporate groups. The juxtaposition with U.S. residents also provides an excellent opportunity for classroom discussion.

Mapuche men seek, build, and maintain one-on-one affiliations through the commonalities of reservation residence, patrilineal kin groups, marriage, and ritual groups (*lof*), all of which are voluntary. The centrality of these relationships comes to fore in Course's detailed descriptions of funerals, ritual field hockey games, and multicomunity annual rituals, all of which vindicate the emphasis on the primacy of the individual rather than preeminence of groups. While all can fortify alliances, funerals and ritual hockey matches in particular are fields of suspicion and competition. All deaths outside of physical combat are because of sorcery, such that even the unification of kin, friends, and affines for funerals is rife with tension and maneuvering. In ritual field hockey, an individual challenges another to a match and only then do the two assemble players from their respective *lofs*, opening rituals of hospitality are riven with gamesmanship, and even the game itself lacks teamwork in favor of players of opposing positions competing individually against each other as "enemy-affines." More challenging to Course's individualistic approach is the multicommunal Ngillatun thanksgiving ritual. Clearly not an individually motivated event, Course explains it as cosmological model of and for the social fields in which Mapuche individuals ally and compete, but even this is structured as a dyad, with two blocks of communities alternating in hosting the annual event.

Course's descriptions of ritual events are sometimes so finely detailed as to be of interest only to ethnologists of the Mapuche and, perhaps, South American indigenous societies generally, which points to a logical tension in the book. As Course acknowledges, "the Mapuche" have experienced tremendous changes over the centuries, but in interpreting the meaning of contemporary Mapuche practices on the Pacific coast, such as ritual field hockey or the concept of the soul, he sometimes turns to historical and other ethnographic documents, seemingly taking for granted a transhistorical Mapuche culture. In other places, Course is more careful in accepting diversity, as in his discussion about where the soul goes after death. Again, this context could make for instructive moments in the classroom.

Overall, Course is careful to couch the dynamics of current Mapuche men's patterns of descent, reciprocity, and animosity as shaped, constrained, or induced by colonial disempowerment and poverty. And here he is at his best. Mapuches have been herded onto reservations that were later reduced and privatized, forced from pastoralism to agriculture, prohibited from practicing polygyny, and observed their population unsustainably increased with accompanying migration to the cities. As a result, kin groups and rituals have weakened, complex bride price procedures have collapsed, and inheritance has been the cause for increasing tension. The dramatic changes cause one to wonder whether such circumstances have contributed to the Mapuche independent mindset.

Becoming Mapuche is a must read for Mapuche scholars, and because Course concludes by ruminating on how the Mapuche "true person" offers clues as to why they have not formed a strong nationalist movement, it makes a nice companion reading to the more politically oriented publications on the Mapuche. With 167 clearly written pages, the book is well suited for both undergraduate introductory and area courses, and Course's individualistic approach has the

potential to generate much discussion about comparisons between the Mapuche and Western societies. I find his approach to Mapuche social organization from the individual up, rather than social groups down, to be refreshing and convincing. The book would also be appropriate and useful for more advanced courses on kinship, the person and society, and ritual and sport. In sum, *Becoming Mapuche* is well researched, well written and organized, and offers a unique and persuasive approach to the Mapuche that would be useful for other indigenous groups as well.